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She-SF: Contemporary Chinese Female Science Fiction and Queer Utopia

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Abstract
This essay examines the contested landscape of contemporary Chinese She-SF as a queer utopia—an intricate blend of literary genre, highly gendered imaginings, and socio-cultural blueprints. The first section explores and defines She-SF in its socio-historical context, providing a brief introduction of the She-SF panorama. The second part introduces two crucial concepts: China's "new women" and "queer utopia." The term "new women" is derived from Tani Barlow's analysis of the historical catachresis *nüxing* 女性 and the intricate historical context surrounding this concept in modern China, as well as the concept of "queer utopia" built on queerness found in Virginia Woolf's endorsement of "androgyny." I connect these two concepts to situate She-SF within the realm of Chinese feminist development and Western queer theory, complicating our understanding of Chinese new women.

Key Words: *She-SF, Queer Utopia, new women, androgyny*

Introduction

能夠突破常識的人才是最有想象力的，因為，很多真理其實就是反常識的東西。

The one who could break through common sense is the most imaginative since truths are anti-common sense most of the time.

能夠率先提出人們可以不要國王，不信宗教，設計出一種新製度的人，這些才是真正的天才。

The one who raises the possibility of doing without a king, or any religion, and develops a new system would be considered as the real genius.

——Tang Wenji 湯問棘 *Ant Colony* 蟻群 (2021) p.43[1]

The narrative of *Ant Colony* kicks off with the meeting of two heroines, α-Han and δ-Rou. As the lead scientist at the data center, α-Han cynically questions existing

1 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

social and political structures, which remain largely unaltered even after the twenty-second-century third World War. Despite the establishment of a matriarchal society, elements such as the nation-state structure, gendered norms, and uneven power dynamics persist. With a majority of men confined to fertility centers for their sperm, the story bears a resemblance to a gender-flipped version of "The Handmaid's Tale." Yet, regardless of whether matriarchy or patriarchy is in place, societal characteristics like selfishness, pride, and envy continue to permeate this "new world" led by females. A significant difference lies in the "Social Management System," powered by quantum computers. This system tracks the behaviors and thoughts of everyone. It imprisons, transforms, or eliminates those deemed "worthless," i.e., individuals with scores below 1000.

In this context of extreme utilitarianism and a digital evaluation framework, *Ant Colony* envisions a queer utopia consisting in the love, cooperation, and occasional competition of the two heroines. It posits intriguing questions: Can "absolute rationality" be achieved under the reign of algorithms? Moreover, could this rationality blur boundaries, equalize inequalities, and realize the ideal of cosmopolitanism? The story abruptly concludes with α-Han's capture after she devises a new system capable of predicting and influencing humanity's future. The open-ended epilogue leaves the long-term effectiveness of this algorithmic control as a mystery. It also introduces the concept of the "Internet of Brain," which dissolves boundaries between public and private spheres, prompting readers to question the essence of humanity. In a world where each individual contains collective knowledge and experience of the past, where the self is indistinguishable from the collective, and the present mirrors the past, does the concept of "I" still hold meaning?

> We have not lost our independent minds, but we are no longer constrained by borders. Everyone is both an individual and a part of the whole, a reflection of the past and a glimpse into the future. Our perception of time is cyclical, and our sensation is boundless. (ibid, 280).

Such a utopia, which shatters traditional conceptions of linear time, three-dimensional space, heterosexual experiences, and conventional power dynamics embraces ambiguity and fluidity, and can aptly be termed "Queer Utopia." Michael Warner defines queerness as that which is "non-straight." It is non-binary, abnormal, and more expansively, a gesture of defiance against the "regimes of the normal." Rather than conforming to homosexual culture, queerness staunchly

opposes the dominance of heteronormativity, encompassing all marginalized and non-conforming groups. Muñoz further refines our comprehension of queerness, intertwining sexuality and temporality: "QUEERNESS IS NOT yet here... (It is) to think and feel *a then and there*" (2009, 1). As Muñoz suggests in *Cruising Utopia*, while queer utopia may seem unattainable and perhaps even impractical for sociopolitical discourse, it should not limit our imaginings of a queer future. Discussing utopia within the context of Chinese fiction, one can argue that "modern Chinese literature emerged with a vision of utopia" (Wang 2020, 53). From the inception of Chinese science fiction over a century ago, concurrent with the introduction and translation of the term "utopia," through the resurgence of science fiction (SF) as children's literature in the 70s, and the "new wave"[2] that has been prominent since the 90s, sociopolitical imagination and utopian futurity have consistently been central to the discourse within Chinese SF.[3] As this genre frequently explores alternatives shaped by technological and philosophical advancements, it is vital to reflect on the distinct "Queer Utopia" that 21st-century She-SF brings to the fore.

A recurring theme within queer utopia is a profound depth and intricacy of human nature. This, alongside inquiries into prevailing social systems, is frequently categorized as "soft SF." This subgenre tends to emphasize sociological evolution and shifting human experiences over hard technological advancements. Xia Jia's 夏笳 (1984-) *Bai gui yexing jie* (百鬼夜行街 "A Hundred Ghosts Parade Tonight") (2010) serves as an excellent example of a typical She-SF. It delves into traditional science fiction metaphysical questioning of what constitutes a "real human-being." The narrative intricately explores relationships and emotions between ghosts, who retain memories of the past, and a toy-like creation capable of behaving like a seven-year-old boy. The underlying theme here still explores the connection between mind/memory and the physical body. Zhao Haihong's 趙海虹 (1977-) *Baobei baobei wo ai ni* (寶貝寶貝我愛你 ("Baby, I Love You") (2002) presents a future where a holographic virtual baby, based on a real baby, takes center stage. It poses the question of whether a game could substitute for reality. Adding a layer of irony, the virtual baby is created by a man who deceives his wife into having a baby to fulfill

2 Here, I am following the genealogy of SF in Chinese literary tradition proposed by Mingwei Song, *Lishi·shixue·wenben*, 2020.

3 As David Wang discusses in his "The Panglossian Dream and Dark Consciousness," "utopia" was translated as 烏托邦 by Yan Fu 嚴復 in 1897 as "a goal to be achieved by any nation committed to the dictum of the survival of the fittest" and later was taken by Liang Qichao 梁啟超 in 1902, digging into the "fictitiousness "of the notion and treating fiction as a way of renovation (pp.55-56). Liang's The Future of New China (1902) is considered one of the most significant early science fictions in Chinese literature.

his company's design plan for a "baby-raising game." Eventually, the man comes to the realization that, no matter how realistic the holographic baby may be, it can never replace the genuine affection he feels for his real-life baby girl. Besides the mind/body concern, other female science fiction authors focus more on the topic of queer ecology. For instance, Chi Hui's 遲卉 *Yulin* (雨林 "The Rainforest") (2007) portrays a failed war between humans and plants, culminating in the last human cyborg warrior, Ye Qi, merging with a daunting rainforest. Another example with distinctive Chinese characteristics is Wang Nuonuo's 王諾諾 *Chuntian lailin de fangshi* (春天來臨的方式 "The Way Spring Arrives") (2019), in which she imagines a unique method of world operation and seasonal transition, drawing from traditional Chinese mythologies. Throughout these She-SF works, there is a prevailing theme of queer imagination concerning the body, time, and space. While some critics argue that they may not feature enough "hard-core science," their focus on the pathos of peripheral existence and introspection into the nature of humanity presents a queer utopia for the future. These narratives challenge conventional norms and expand the boundaries of what is possible in realms of science fiction.

Thus, this essay examines the contested landscape of contemporary Chinese She-SF as a queer utopia—an intricate blend of literary genre, highly gendered imaginings, and socio-cultural blueprints. The first section explores and defines She-SF in its socio-historical context, providing a brief introduction of the She-SF panorama. The second part introduces two crucial concepts: China's "new women" and "queer utopia." The term "new women" is derived from Tani Barlow's analysis of the historical catachresis *nüxing* 女性 and the intricate historical context surrounding this concept in modern China.[4] Understanding the genealogy of She-SF within the intellectual history of new women enriches our comprehension of female conditions. The concept of "queer utopia" builds on the queerness found in Virginia Woolf's endorsement of "androgyny." Woolf proposed that female writers should explore themes beyond gender limitations, expanding their perspectives for the benefit of all humankind. I connect these two concepts to situate She-SF within the realm of Chinese feminist development and Western queer theory, complicating our understanding of Chinese new women. By contextualizing She-SF within its historical framework, I contend that incorporating the study of science fiction into Chinese gender studies could pave the way for a dynamic textual space that fosters

4 See: Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*. Since Barlow's book is published in 2004, her discussion on the changing notion "women" in Chinese feminism ends up there.

deeper exploration and understanding.

What is She-SF?

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the trajectory of Chinese science fiction encountered decades of stagnation, leading to a genre fusion of science fiction, children's literature, and science popularization that blurred distinct boundaries.[5] This situation persisted until the emergence of the "SF New Wave" in the 1990s. With this prolonged period of dormancy, She-SF, situated at the fringes of an already marginalized genre, receded into obscurity until the 21st century. Mingwei Song presents a compelling argument that within the realm of Chinese SF, as a minor literary genre, an innate capacity exists to confront predominant ideologies and mainstream discourse. This perspective aligns seamlessly with Wu Yan's assertion that SF's legitimacy stems from its very marginality. Upon analyzing the works of the "Big Three" writers Wang Jinkang, Liu Cixin, and Han Song; Mingwei Song astutely discerns how this new generation of SF authors renders the intricate tapestry of China's fantastical and authentic transformations, transcending the bounds of conventional narratives (2016). In parallel, the new wave of She-SF has undergone a resurgence, as authors delve into the intricate interplay between gender, socioeconomic status, and political power within contemporary China. Their focus zeros in on the experiences of marginalized groups within a post-socialist context. Over the past few decades, these literary works have catalyzed a queer turn in China, rooted in the sweeping disparities and intricate complexities of the nation.

Before diving into the world of She-SF, two pivotal questions must be addressed: What exactly is She-SF, and how can we interpret it in a productive way? The term "She-SF" made its debut among contemporary Chinese readers with the rise of Hao Jingfang 郝景芳(1984-) who garnered international acclaim by clinching the 74th Hugo Award for Best Novelette for her piece, "Folding Beijing" in 2016. Five years on, a compilation comprising over fifty short stories from 24 female authors titled *Ta kehuan* (她科幻"She-SF")(2021) was released, underscoring the influence of women SF creators. She-SF was then predominantly associated with female writers and bore a feminist undertone. The term transitioned into scholarly discussions through the insights of Mingwei Song, who posited that the contemporary surge of SF penned by Chinese women drew parallels with the lyrical

5 The critics against treating science fiction as child literature, see: Wu, *Kehuan Wenxue Ganglun*.

style and cyborg-centric narratives that characterized Western feminist SF.[6] Song ventured to transcend traditional gender confines that restricted She-SF discussions solely to female writers, highlighting poetic expression in the works of Ken Liu and Liu Cixin as prime examples of She-SF. Consequently, Song expanded the scope of She-SF, encompassing not just works by female writers but also pieces marked by queer imagination and lyrical storytelling. A notable example is the anthology titled *The Way Spring Arrives and Other Stories: A Collection of Chinese Science Fiction and Fantasy in Translation*, released in 2022. This collection, available in both English and Chinese, curates a range of She-SF pieces from female and nonbinary writers, translators, and scholars. As Jing Tsu articulates in "The Futures of Genders in Chinese Science Fiction," rather than resorting to "universal gestures" (91), these authors delve into a deeper, nuanced exploration of how individual experiences are influenced by one's unique positionality, inviting readers to envision fresh perspectives on subjectivity and nonfixed womanhood.

In my definition, "She-SF" is not merely a genre defined by female authors or characterized by female protagonists or feminist ideologies. It represents a potent narrative force that disrupts conventional gender binaries and envisions fluid, often nebulous physiological structures while challenging societal norms and temporal boundaries. While this essay focuses primarily on female science fiction authors, the objective is not to isolate them but to illuminate the transformative potential inherent in She-SF. While gender is a tangible reality for these authors, their inner standpoints vary. It is notable that some female science fictionists might still project male gaze, and occasionally, even express misogynistic tendencies. Yet, at its heart, She-SF seeks a feminist evolution that transcends traditional gender constraints to traverse the vastness of reality and the intricacies of history. This is further exemplified in this essay through the concept of "androgyny" in a later part. Two key analytical points emerge from defining She-SF. Understanding how She-SF reinterprets and augments our notions of modern womanhood, and how its queer utopian elements enrich our understanding of society. Essentially, She-SF harnesses science and technology to imagine a queer utopia, weaving stories that offer a softer, lyrical counter-narrative to the stark realities we face.

The Chinese science fiction New Wave took shape in the 90s, propelled by the

6 From Song's public talk "The Rise of She-SF: Chinese Science Fiction's Next Wave" via Zoom (Feb 6, 2023). Also, see Song, "*Kehuan de xingbie wenti*."

rise of Internet literature and infused with romantic inclinations stemming from Opening Up and Reforms. Concurrently, the ascent of She-SF paralleled a broader science fiction renaissance at the dawn of the 21st century, distinguishing itself with its resistance to genre constraints and a multidisciplinary approach. While frequently labeled as soft science fiction, whether as historical SF, romantic SF, or scientific realism, female science fiction writers from the 90s and beyond have audaciously contested the conventionally male-centric, techno-focused SF narrative. In chronological order of their appearance, She-SF can be broadly segmented into unique kinds.

The first category encompasses fantasy-style science fiction, which has sparked debates regarding the definition of SF.[7] Qian Lifang 錢麗芳 (1978-) played a leading role in this style-formation with her pioneering *lishi kehuan wenxue* (歷史科幻文學 "historical SF") blending elements of romance, fantasy, Wuxia, and history. This unique amalgamation garnered widespread readership and earned significant acclaim. Notably, her novel *Providence* 天意 (2004) received the esteemed Special Award of the 2004 Galaxy Award, a prestigious recognition in mainland China's SF community. Admittedly, two decades later, some readers might criticize aspects like its contradictory setting for a time travel machine, the old-school alien invention, and a storyline that appears to align with the notion of "galactic suburbia," a term coined by Joanna Russ to critique SF narratives that envision high-tech, far-future scenarios with gender relations still resembling those of present-day, white, middle-class suburbia.[8] However, Qian Lifang takes a distinct approach by questioning and subverting the expectations for women SF writers. She weaves stories of historical figure Han Xin and the romance between him and a girl from the future. It epitomizes the pinnacle of historical SF: rooted in history, enriched with scientific imagination, and culminating in historical narrative. The transformation of of the "Galactic Suburbia" setting becomes a powerful narrative tool to explore hopes and fears entwined with destined courses of the past, as well as uncertainties of a future in the context of a technocultural new world order. In doing so, Qian challenges conventional gender imaginings and offers a fresh perspective on history and the possibilities that lie ahead. Following *Providence*, Qian persisted in her exploration

7 For various subgenres such as *qihuan* ("Western-style fantasy"), *xuanhuan* ("Eastern-style fantasy"), *wuxia* ("martial arts"), and *kehuan* ("science fiction"), see Immortal Mountain's glossary at: https://immortalmountain.wordpress.com/glossary/wuxia-xianxia-xuanhuan-terms/. Quote from Chau, 2018, p118.

8 Yaszek, *Galactic Suburbia*, pp. 3-4.

of historical SF, producing works like *Tianming* (天命 "Destiny") (2011) which recounts the tale of Su Wu and Wei Lü; as well as *Feisheng* (飛升 "Ascendence") (2004), which explores the mysterious disappearance of Emperor Wu Di of the Han dynasty, offering a unique rendition of the romantic tale between him and his queen, Chen A-Jiao. Notably, each of her stories revolves around a heroine who disrupts the established timeline, ultimately leading to the salvation of the world. This protagonist could be an imagined girl from the future or a reimagined well-known historical figure.

Within the realm of historical SF, several female authors explore alternative timelines, shedding light on often-overlooked aspects of minority history. Xia Jia's earlier works like *Yong xia zhi meng* (永夏之夢 "Dream of Eternal Summer) (2008) present a romance between the immortal Yan Emperor and a time traveler, whereas *Miluo Jiang shang* (汨羅江上 "On River Miluo) (2008) devises a "psychological historical analysis" to avert Qu Yuan's (屈原, c. 340-278 BCE) tragic end. Like Qian Lifang, Xia Jia is drawn to imagining the intimate lives of historical figures, finding a mysterious allure in unrecorded emotional depths. Though destiny's hand remains unaltered in her tales, the journey to potentially reshape history remains compelling. Wu Shuang's 吳霜 *Yuzhou jintou de canguan* (宇宙盡頭的餐館 "The Restaurant at the End of the Universe") (2014) series creatively intertwines numerous Chinese historical figures, offering imaginative tales linked to their artistic or literary legacies; Cheng Jingbo's 程婧波 Gan zai xianluo zhiqian (趕在陷落之前 "Lost in Luoyang") (2020) offers an alternative perspective on Princess Nanyang; Hao Jingfang's *E'pang Gong* (阿房宮 "E'pang Palace") (2015) envisions an accidental discovery of the immortal Qin Shi Huang. While these works may not overtly express feminist ideals, they home in on gaps within linear history, exploring potential to challenge traditional temporal constructs. It's their embrace of queer temporality and the pursuit of alternative narratives that give their stories transformative power. Authors' gender perspectives subtly influence the storytelling lens. Most of these narratives eschew an omniscient, objective standpoint in favor of a more feminist perspective. This does not always align with a female character, but often highlights marginalized or underrepresented voices in history. By feminizing the narrator and fracturing the timeline, readers are encouraged to empathize with these figures and reflect upon untold stories in broader historical contexts.

The second category, scientific realism, utilizes realistic elements within futuristic

settings to underscore historical nuances of womanhood. Numerous female science fiction writers champion the mantra of authentic and typical representation. They meticulously adhere to realistic logic, blending it with scientific imagination to depict genuine societal scenarios. By focusing on women and the marginalized classes, these writers seek to uncover the repression, discomfort, and subtle tensions present in a patriarchal society. Hao Jingfang, who defines her writing style as "genre-less literature," is known for her "scientific realism." She focuses on a literary form that cares about reality but presents as fictionality, exploring an alternative possibility for the real world (2016, 2). She emphasizes that her work explores an in-between realm, caring about reality but representing it as fiction.

Within the realm of scientific realism, works can be roughly segmented into two thematic clusters. The first cluster revolves around the challenges faced by marginalized groups. Hao Jingfang's "Folding Beijing" (2015) delves into the nuances of socio-economic stratification. Xia Jia's "Tongtong's Summer" (2014) addresses the complexities of aging, exploring the synchronous existence of bodies assisted by VR and robots, forming a utopia where senior citizens could help each other via technological development, while "Spring Festival: Happiness, Anger, Love, Sorrow, Joy" paints a vivid picture through six significant phases of Chinese culture. These phases include the traditional *zhuazhou* ritual (a ritual for one-year-old), the Chinese New Year Gala, blind dates, Valentine's Day celebrations, alumni reunions, and ninety-nine-year-old birthdays. In these stories, time is condensed into pivotal moments, emphasizing the disconnection wrought by technology and big data. A second thematic cluster centers on the specific challenges women face amidst systemic constraints. Tang Wenji's *Ant Colony* satirically critiques a patriarchal society's obsession with hyper-stability, positing chaos, or queerness, as a potent counterforce. Works like Wang Nuonuo's *Gailiang renlei* (改良人類 "Modifying Human") and *Diqiu wu yingda* (地球無應答 "The Earth without Answer") explore the tension between idealistic perfection and intrinsic chaos. Written with a satirical edge, these narratives challenge prevailing societal attitudes and authority figures. By reimagining classic utopian tales, they deconstruct an age-old binary of male and female. Moving away from traditional lyrical styles often associated with female authors, these works, rich in irony and parody, provoke thought on existing power dynamics. She-SF, when viewed through the lens of scientific realism, serves as a poignant reflection of both present and potential future societal dynamics. Over the

past decade, a burgeoning number of SF writers have acknowledged the pervasive influence of "Galactic Suburbia" within hard SF and the overarching societal restraints they encounter. It underscores the urgent need to conceptualize a queer utopia, defined by its fluid passage of time, malleable spaces (be they physical, domestic, or national), and versatile identities.

In the domain of She-SF, the first two styles tend to align with traditional literary frameworks, often echoing conventions of male-centric SF narratives. However, the third style delves deeper, capturing a rich tapestry of feminine experiences interwoven with queer insights. This approach ventures into territories often sidestepped by hard SF, accentuating intricate personal journeys and emotional evolutions. Rather than portraying conventional female characters, these stories unearth the multifaceted depths of women's psychophysical landscapes and their diverse emotional worlds. The exploration of alternative romantic and familial relationships serves as a primary theme in this category, bringing to the fore profound questions about human nature. It raises pertinent questions. When people are controlled by widespread knowledge and act accordingly, and when emotions are lost to ruthless knowledge, can we still consider ourselves human beings? Writers and many others in the 21st century have initiated discussions on whether soft SF, focusing on systemic social development or psychological dilemmas in the future world, holds the same status as techno-centered hard SF. Consider Su Min's 蘇民 *Hou yishi shidai* (後意識時代 "Post-consciousness Era") as an illustration. While rooted in the quintessential SF theme of consciousness, it intricately charts its protagonist's journey across myriad roles: a psychologist, a mother, a wife, and as an individual. Su masterfully delineates her protagonist's navigation through the world of interconnected consciousness and the flood of unending knowledge, providing a vivid insight into the evolving tapestry of womanhood in a transformative world.

Another recurring motif is the exploration of body politics, intertwined with inner posthuman concerns. Numerous works explore the concept of the cyborg, defined as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (Haraway 2016). Three specific boundaries become blurred here: the human-animal, the organic-mechanical, and the tangible-intangible. From its inception, She-SF has keenly observed the myriad ways power dynamics and societal politics influence our physical forms. For instance, Hao Jingfang's *Yongsheng yiyuan* (永生醫院 "The Immortal Hospital")

(2017) discusses the intricate connection between the physical body and memory, questioning the essence of identity in the absence of memories. In Gu Shi's 顧適 "Mobius Spatiotemporality" (2020), the protagonist undergoes a car accident and subsequently has a microchip implanted in their brain. This chip allows "I" to control machines which aid in the recovery of their injured body. The autonomy granted by this cyborg enhancement even extends to performing surgery on oneself. Tang Fei's 糖匪 recent work *Houlai de renlei* (後來的人類 "The Later Human")(2023)[9] ponders the malleability of human memory in the age of cloud storage, offering a fresh take on artificial recollections. Introducing a post-apocalyptic perspective set against a backdrop of technological crisis and natural aging, these narratives underscore the significance of the cyborg notion. In addition to the traditional boundaries the cyborg disrupts, it also challenges the body-mind dichotomy and the classic dualism of subject and other. As technology evolves, it introduces a newfound ambiguity between the physical and mental, inviting She-SF to reimagine this traditionally binary relationship.

Heroines in these narratives grapple with contemporary challenges and those on the horizon, often displaying traits of self-preservation and detachment. Such grounded characteristics shatter the archetypal "pretty, selfless, intelligent, and perfect" female depictions typically constructed by male science fiction writers. More critically, this style of storytelling brings forth the once-muted emotional expressions and subconscious sentiments, imbuing them with feminine nuances. These narratives suggest that feminist consciousness and a queer utopia do not aim to belittle, scorn, or combat men, but to recognize the contradictory and multifaceted nature of the existing system, which shouldn't be accepted as a given. The focus on individual experiences and the envisioning of a malleable cyborg body seeks a departure from patriarchal constraints. She-SF aims to carve out a queer cultural order, emotional articulation, and discourse to convey a vision: a future that is truly for all women.

9 For the Chinese title "後來的人類," it could be "The Later Human (後來的/人類)" or "The Human who Comes Late (後/來的人類). As Tang Fei mentions in the afterword, she attempts to write about common people's daily life in the posthuman period or the group that could not catch up with the technological development and therefore was left out.

Chinese new écriture féminine and androgyny

Since the mid-1980s, the concept of "female literature 女性文學" or "woman's literature 婦女文學" carved out its distinct niche. The increasing popularity of such literature by the mid-90s, and the sustained scrutiny it received from literary critics, transformed the intersection of gender and literature into a dynamic arena for discourse. This engaging debate served to deepen people's understanding of gender roles in societal, cultural, and individual contexts, further encouraging exploration and imaginative discourse on gender politics.[10] In the contemporary Chinese literary landscape, science fiction, as one of the most popular genres, isn't immune to these intricate and passionate gender discussions. It matches, if not surpasses, the intensity and complexity found in other genres. Given the creative imagination and poetic expression inherent to science fiction, coupled with the academic inclinations of 21st-century female creators, She-SF is heavily influenced by Western science fiction and feminist theories.[11] Meanwhile, it endeavors to incorporate elements and characteristics from traditional Chinese myths and history to resonate with global literary tastes.[12]

The surge in popularity of "female literature" since the 90s is particularly noteworthy due to its significant role in reconstructing and reevaluating the concepts of "Chinese new women" and "female consciousness" (He 2003). The post-Mao era witnessed transformative social changes and ideological shifts, leading to a substantial reexamination of the identification of new women as a social role and gender identity. While scholars like Dai Jinhua have traced this process back to the 80s, the cultural atmosphere of Enlightenment and elitism during that time confined women's cultural identity to the realm of liberal feminism. This focus centered on abstract discussions of women's social status and cultural conditions, based on the concept of subjectivity in the "human-being."[13] Compared to the egalitarianist notion

10 For an overview on Chinese female literature and its dialectical relationship with gender politics in real life, see: He, *Nüxing wenxue yu xingbie zhengzhi de bianqian*.

11 It is noteworthy that almost all female science fiction authors in China have impressive educational backgrounds. For instance, Xia Jia, an associate professor at Xi'an Jiaotong University and a graduate of Peking University, publishes academic journals on SF studies under her real name, Wang Yao. Hao Jingfang holds a PhD in Economics from Tsinghua University. Wang Nuonuo boasts a Bachelor's degree in Economics from the University of British Columbia and a Master's in Environmental Economics from Cambridge University. Tang Wenji is a graduate of Peking University, and the list goes on. I believe their prestigious academic backgrounds and international training equip these writers with an acute awareness of gender issues and enable them to delve deeply into both personal and collective experiences as women.

12 A detailed analysis on how contemporary Chinese SF enters into the canon of world literature, see: Chau, "From Nobel to Hugo."

13 A thorough analysis on Dai's position in post-Mao gender studies, see: Barlow, "Dai Jinhua, Globalization, and 1990s Poststructuralist Feminism."

that "women hold up half the world" from the Maoist era, little had fundamentally changed. It wasn't until the 90s that a reconstruction of female consciousness occurred within popular culture and common societal beliefs. Foundational Chinese gender studies scholar Li Xiaojiang likens the representation of gender issues in women's creative writing to matters of "population and marriage in family," emphasizing that literature plays a significant role in addressing the concerns of liberated women. These writers seek to chronicle real experiences in the spiritual and social realms after acquiring subject consciousness" (1995, 5). The phenomenon of the "female literature fever" serves as a concentrated representation of this ongoing process of reconstruction.

In another classical, if not the most influential critical feminist literary work *Surfacing onto the Horizon of History* (1989), Dai Jinhua and Meng Yue once pioneered the argument that the historical condition of contemporary Chinese women is "between the visible and invisible," forming historical national feminism to cope with such invisibility. What is visible and protrudes are the advocation of female liberation and virtual presentations of female subjectivity during the Maoist era; whereas the invisibility lies in the reality that advocation and reiteration of female figures is to treat them as an "empty signifier," as what they signified was the socialist class struggle and equalist political agenda rather than the plight of women, per se. And until the 80s, mainstream female liberating theory in China used class liberation instead of gender liberation. Dai and Meng introduced psychoanalysis, narrative theory, structuralism, and post-structuralism to explore power dynamics within traditional Chinese gender relations, raising *nüxing* as the "ruled gender" as a secret basis of the social structure. In other words, within the patriarchal system, positioning the female as the opposite and the Other is key to sustaining social order, i.e., "women become the bodily entry point into history for Chinese men" (Barlow 2004, 343). From the arrangement of male dominance and female submission comes binary opposition between the rule and the ruled. In a stable social structure like this, not only is the very existence of women erased, but the erasure process has been covered and justified by men.

> What emerged since the mid 80s was a separation theory of the female problem and class struggle. This reflected upon and critiqued Maoist class liberation theory. It was no better than the liberation theory, since the separation overemphasized gender difference while not considering

> the Enlightenment movement's basis in human nature. Thus, it discussed women simply as women and fell into a circular reasoning process of gender essentialism. In terms of literary critics and research practices, the discussions turn into a pre-existing position as a woman. The Enlightenment discourse lingers upon the abstractive essence of human and humanity, while Dai and Meng's discussion merges with patriarchal history, which the whole of society is built upon. Since history is written by men, male dominance is represented as "nature" and male discourse is narrated as one with being human. To make écriture féminine visible is not just to bridge the gendered gap, it is to overturn the patriarchal system. However, the limitation of *Surfacing* is to simplify the fluid, complicated, queer world into a pre-assumed male/female binary opposition in which unspeakable subaltern women serve as empty signifiers. Meanwhile, it assumes an essential imaginary into which the female truth lies, while being repressed by the male, and the value of female writing is to present this female part of reality and thereby reconstruct social structure. The problem is that if patriarchy is built up based on an opposite gender consisting in the female as a collective group, how and when have women any existence, even in terms of the existence as an opposed Other? To push it further, has the "reality" of women ever existed (Chen, 1995)?

To critically think upon these questions, in *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*, Tani Barlow reads the catachresis *nüxing* (female group) and *funü* historically by stressing their "heterogeneous contents as well as their centrality and instability, what historians would call contingency" (2004, 1). Tracing back to the historical context and the genealogical development of the neo-lexicons around women and Chinese feminist movements, Barlow argues that whatever attempts Chinese feminists make, they always ended up with sets of "globalizing signifiers." Dai's feminism also falls into this trap. The biggest problem of her feminism is to denote a "national identity (*shenfen* or *rentong*) cast in the internationalized scope of anti-essentialist feminism" (ibid, 354). Having noticed that Barlow's critics towards Dai as a nationalist feminist date back to 2004, in the recent decades, Dai has produced more catachresis and built-up a targeted Otherness by reiterating her post-colonialist position and triggering a nationalist fever among the audience. Instances include but are not limited to fiercely criticizing Eileen Chang's *Rice Sprout* as "not a literary work but all politics;" when an audience quoted Long Yingtai's statement, she responded that "Long should go to hell since she is the minister of Taiwan Cultural Ministry."[14] Rejecting both female writers' literary success and defining them as ideological tools, in turn, make Dai a Chinese nationalist ideological

14 See the Q&A video: "应改为戴錦華評張愛玲：我對張愛玲熱難辭其咎"

spokeswoman. More often Dai actively participates in public discourse, covering not only film studies, cultural studies, and literary criticism, but also is also critical of news critics on issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Russian-Ukraine war. More patterns emerge from her interviews and public speeches, focusing on how all problems that Chinese women have faced are because of capitalism and the "middle-class" as well as globalization.[15] The generalization of feminist problems as part of a grand systematic malfunction has not produced any productive solutions, nor any new way of thinking through the idea of "Chinese new women" in current time and space.

If we consider pre-90s feminist critiques as advocating a move beyond the confines of women's issues to embrace feminism as a form of humanism, then the post-90s movement led by Dai and her disciples returns to a focus on women, but with a pronounced nationalistic flavor.[16] This "obsession with Chinese women," taking inspiration from C.T. Hsia's renowned concept of the "obsession with China," points to an increasing number of female writers and critics in the period from the mid-80s onwards. They have highlighted the conspicuous absence of female representations in traditional Chinese literature while simultaneously emphasizing the distinctive nature of China. In other words, they stress the notion of "Chinese characteristics." While this renewed focus on women is commendable, the embedded nationalism within this perspective is also noteworthy. Can She-SF transcend this preoccupation? And how might it be understood to shed light on the evolving concept of the "new woman" emerging from its narratives?

Here, I aim to highlight the potential for androgyny within contemporary Chinese She-SF, which brings a fresh perspective to the exploration of the concept of *nüxing* and lays the groundwork for a queer utopia. The term "androgyny," referenced by Virginia Woolf from Samuel Taylor Coleridge in her seminal work, *A Room of One's*

15 For a newly published overview on Dai's position, see Hou, "Fansi 'Dai Jinhua re.'"

16 For instance, He Guimei, a student of Dai, extensively employs postcolonial feminism in her analysis of female literary works. In the last three chapters of *Nüxing wenxue yu xingbie zhengzhi de bianqian*, she positions female protagonists parallel to the Chinese nation. Another of Dai's students, Wang Yao (previously mentioned as the real name of Xia Jia), posits that the rise in popularity of Chinese science fiction since the 90s stems from the challenges presented by capitalism. She asserts that "the intensification, broadening, and detailing of an indescribable sense of eeriness and insecurity in daily life symbolize the cautionary force of the 'non-human'." Additionally, she believes that "the triumph of late-capitalism globally has caused a loss in our ability to envision alternatives, resulting in feelings of vulnerability and impotence."

Own, is encapsulated in the phrase "a great mind must be androgynous."[17] While the term "androgyny" traditionally signifies a combination of male and female traits, Woolf reinterprets it to represent a harmonious blend of male and female principles, described as "rationality and intuition" (Farwell, 435) or "knowing by apartness and knowing by togetherness" (Bazin, 3). Using androgyny as a lens, Woolf critiques female authors' tendency to narrow their focus solely on women's experiences, thereby overlooking the perspectives of the Other. She contends that such a restrictive view neglects insights from half of humanity. Woolf advocated for female writers to move beyond strict gender boundaries, urging them to embrace broader human narratives since, as Farwell notes, "there is no identifiable one and the Other" (441). Moreover, her publication of *Orlando* sparks extensive debate about the deconstruction of time, sex, gender, and the foundational realism of the biography genre. Woolf asserts that gender is not static or homogenous; so, why should female authors constrain themselves merely to exploring women's narratives? However, when female creators explore the same themes as their male counterparts, how can they write beyond the confines of gender?

Contrary to the 90's feminist critics who emphasize that female writers should focus keenly on their gendered experiences, She-SF is characterized by its attention to universal human dilemmas, often expressed through lyrical narratives and peripheral concerns. This evolved gender awareness moves beyond the humanistic liberation of the 80's and the 90's fixation on Chinese women. It champions collaboration across species and genders, recognizing that in an age of rapid technological advancement, there are more shared experiences and mutual affections among humans, animals, and even machines than there are differences. Emphasizing individuality, She-SF celebrates queer bodies and love-challenging societal conventions, suggesting that this is a path forward. This transcendent perspective on gender suggests that contemporary female science fiction writers are moving away from being mere representatives of one gender group. Instead, they delve into the fundamental and shared experiences of all beings, with themes such as eschatology/utopia, order/fluidity, and loneliness/love becoming central to She-SF. Gender, while still a significant topic, is often used more as a mode of expression or narrative style. This

17 Although *A Room of One's Own* was first published in 1929, it originates from two speeches Woolf delivered in 1928 at the University of Cambridge. Thus, it coincides with the same time-frame as her publication of *Orlando: A Biography* (1928). Numerous essays on androgyny have been written since the 60s.

reconstruction of gender boundaries offers a fresh perspective on Chinese écriture féminine.

Echoing Woolf's concept of "Androgyny," the emerging female science fiction writer Shuang Chi Mu雙翅目 commented in an interview about "gender-neutral writing." She emphasized that it is not about writing devoid of gender considerations but transcending the confines of gendered perspectives. To her, it has become cliché to merely submit to or resist gender power dynamics. Instead, the primary focus should be on creating "a vividly living human."[18] Typically, her science fiction stories feature male protagonists, as she believes that "crafting a man devoid of labels is much simpler." For her, being gender-neutral involves striking a balance between scientific rationality and emotional expression, wherein constructing both male and female protagonists holds equal significance.

In her work *Jingshen caiyang* (精神採樣 "Spirit Sampling") (2018), Shuang Chi Mu delves into the intricate connections and empathy between humans and the Other. She uses robots, cyborgs, and the vastness of the universe as means to understand and empathize with entities distinct from oneself. The story envisions a future where "spiritual slices" can be transformed through microchips embedded in human brains. Much like a computer, feelings and experiences can be extracted, saved, and transferred amongst individuals. The central character, Chen Geng, is depicted as a "mediocre," an individual with no extraordinary spiritual world or unique emotional perturbations during the sampling process, making him a pure "medium" for spirit sampling. This narrative, drawing from Descartes' philosophical separation of body and mind, unfolds through the diverse interpretations of Chen and his two MIT roommates, Leila and Nicolas. Chen embodies the straightforward body-mind dichotomy, seeking to "sample all potential human spiritual structures." Leila signifies the merger of human and machine (a cyborg) emphasizing the spiritual system's extension to a silicon body. Her union with Jimmy, a robot encapsulating the entirety of human knowledge from the internet, positions him as a hub for all open-source spirits. Meanwhile, Nicolas embarks on an alternate journey of understanding human boundaries by allowing a brain to assimilate the vast universe, proposing a world where humans coexist harmoniously with the boundless cosmos.

Through these three perspectives, Shuang Chi Mu reexamines the body-mind

18 See: https://read.douban.com/reader/bulletin/55890049/?dcs=search

dichotomy, elevating it to an interconnected, systemic relationship between the human body and the spiritual cosmos. Humans, being an integral part of the universe, contribute to its overarching narrative. Simultaneously, humans represent embodied cognition, where all physical experiences, from touch to emotions, as well as love to disdain, collectively shape one's identity. This shift from a body-spirit dichotomy to a holistic body-spirit-cosmos trinity propels Chen Geng into a journey of self-discovery. By the story's conclusion, Chen Geng "boards a plane, flying over the equator towards the Andes Mountains, in search of love he has never pursued." Carrying the essence of all human spirits and navigating the vast expanse of the universe, he comes to a profound realization: he has never truly experienced love, an emotion Shuang Chi Mu believes lies at the heart of humanity. Revisiting the topic of androgynous writing, "Spirit Sampling" delves deeper into the shared essence of all life, transcending the confines of individual gender.

Returning to the essay's introductory example, *Ant Colony* offers a fresh lens to understand androgynous writing and the queer utopia. Tang Wenji presents systematic ambiguity and gender fluidity in a manner that prompts more insightful reflections on future systems. While early sections of the work, addressing topics like discrimination against men and mental control, might evoke memories of dystopian tales by George Orwell or Margaret Atwood from a century ago,[19] α-Han's exploration of *mang* (盲"chaos") (directly translating to "blind" or "without direction") acknowledges the potency of disorder. "Life is messy and chaotic; only in death and nothingness is there pristine clarity," (2021, 90) she writes. She portrays Darwinian evolution as a directionless journey where numerous paths emerge, most of which become redundant. Yet, this inherent chaos fuels evolution, as it isn't bound by constraints. Life, in its core, is queer. Any attempts to impose order or direction invariably fail. Drawing from her dual majors in bioscience and ancient Chinese literature, Tang interprets the ant, the title's namesake, as the epitome of a social creature, indistinguishable as individuals, cohesively organized, and meticulously regulated. *Ant Colony* symbolizes the quest for an "ideal" world, meticulously crafted where society attains *chao wending shehui* (超穩定社會 "hyper-stability") eliminating space for natural uncertainties. However, this stability results in stasis and inflexibility because, as she posits, humanity cannot surpass nature.

In nature's perspective, chaos or serendipity underpins life, much like the

19 See: Parasecoli, "Tasty Utopias"; Boyd, "Ustopian Breakfasts."

wonders of bioscience do not follow a deliberate agenda. Inspired by α-Han's chaos hypothesis, δ-Rou adopts a "blind" approach to nurturing "terrorists." She uses programs embedded with data from the correction center to generate memories and simulate the natural progression of minds. In the concluding chapter, while detained as a prisoner for the upheaval she instigated in assessing the new purely rational system, α-Han extols the virtues of "chaos," envisioning a novel system to steer through the unpredictable landscape of the post-Anthropocene future.[20] In this final vision of *Ant Colony*, a future steered by algorithms emerges, characterized by an unbiased system. This queer utopia disrupts binary human stereotypes, achieving genuine equality where all possess a shared consciousness, collective memories, and a unified future. However, δ-Rou stands as the lone individual who declines to share her memory and mind with the world, becoming the enigmatic guardian of both her own and α-Han's memories. It is δ-Rou who uncovers α-Han's creation of the new system, embraces the philosophy of chaos, and ultimately reports on α-Han while choosing to further the testing of this new system. On the surface, δ-Rou seems to defy the governmental authority for the greater societal good. But it is essential to recognize that this new system also represents α-Han's dream. Tang Wenji leaves room for readers to contemplate the nature of the relationship between these two protagonists. Their unique, unshared memories serve as a protective barrier, possibly shielding their intimate queer bond.

Both "Spirit Sampling" and *Ant Colony* take readers on a journey from pure rationality—seen in the separation of body and spirit and the pursuit of hyper-stability—back to the core of human essence: the embodied cognition of love and the sanctity of individual memory. These narratives prompt deeper reflection on the balance between rationality and intuition, between wholeness and individuality—essentially exploring the concept of androgyny. Rather than providing definitive conclusions, these works diverge from conventional narratives. They do not advocate a specific viewpoint as right or wrong but present varied perceptions of the world. Their true brilliance lies in how they unravel these intricate, systematic philosophies.

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20 α-Han develops a system to determine the future of human beings. Calculating, comparing all the possible outcomes of different data sets, and choosing the most optimal one, the operation of the new system should be treated as the post-Anthropocene since it is decided by the non-human.

Conclusion

Female science fiction writers born in the 80s and 90s have been at the forefront of the She-SF movement in recent decades. Through the lens of queer utopia, these trailblazers shift the focus from societal struggles and personal narratives to broader gender issues. Moving away from the earlier narratives that primarily aimed to assert women's strength, akin to the "Mulan" archetype, and diverging from the 90s feminist literature's fixation on Chinese women, twenty-first-century She-SF showcases a nuanced understanding of gender. These narratives often depict gender and sexuality ambiguously, eschewing simplistic, three-dimensional scenarios and challenging linear historical perspectives, thus conveying a distinct queer sensibility. The hallmark of She-SF lies in its exploration of the unique and often hidden experiences of the marginalized, whether they be socio-economically disadvantaged, women, or underrepresented ecosystems. Embracing an androgynous viewpoint and avoiding conventional hero-driven narratives are central to these writings. Yet, gender is not their sole focus. Simply put, female science fiction writers are crafting a queer utopia, and it is unfolding in the present.

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